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SUBJECT: SYRIAN ACTIVIST RIAD SEIF ON OPPOSITION GROUP,  
ELECTIONS, AND STATE OF THE REGIME

CLASSIFIED BY: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES MICHAEL H. CORBIN FOR  
REASONS 1.4 B/D

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: SYRIAN OPPOSITION LEADER RIAD SEIF MET MARCH 22 WITH A/DCM, PROVIDING AN UPDATE ON THE DAMASCUS DECLARATION (DD) GROUP, AND HIS CURRENT ASSESSMENT OF THE ASAD REGIME. SEIF, WHO HEADS THE DD'S EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE, SAID ITS MEMBERS WERE WORKING TO ENLARGE THE DD POSSIBLY AS EARLY AS NEXT MONTH. WHILE SOME MEMBERS OPPOSED AN EXPANSION FOR FEAR IT WOULD DILUTE THEIR INFLUENCE IN THE GROUP, THE MAJORITY OF MEMBERS BELIEVE THEY SHOULD BROADEN THE COALITION TO INCLUDE YOUNGER ASSOCIATES AND TOLERANT MUSLIMS AND ISLAMISTS, SEIF SAID. DD MEMBERS, INCLUDING REPRESENTATIVES OF THE COALITION'S KURDISH PARTIES, HAVE FORMALLY DECIDED TO BOYCOTT SYRIA'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, SEIF SAID. THE SARG HAS CONVINCED THE MAJORITY OF THE SYRIAN PUBLIC THAT IT HAS WON ITS BATTLE WITH THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND ENDED ITS INTERNATIONAL ISOLATION, SEIF STATED. IN REALITY, HOWEVER, THE SARG CONTINUES TO WORRY ABOUT ITS FATE, PARTICULARLY GIVEN THE LOOMING PROSPECT OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL TO TRY SUSPECTS IN THE ASSASSINATION OF FORMER LEBANESE PM RAFIK HARIRI. SIGNS OF SARG UNEASE INCLUDE A RECENT DECREE REQUIRING ALL ELECTION CANDIDATES TO GET APPROVAL 48 HOURS IN ADVANCE FOR ELECTION-RELATED MEETINGS AND HEIGHTENED SARG SURVEILLANCE ON MEMBERS OF THE OPPOSITION, HE SAID. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) DAMASCUS DECLARATION GROUP: SEIF SAID THAT MEMBERS WERE WORKING TO ENLARGE THE DD FROM 35 PERSONS BY POSSIBLY UP TO 60 PERSONS, POSSIBLY AS EARLY AS NEXT MONTH. WHILE SOME MEMBERS SUCH AS SOCIALIST UNION CHIEF HASSAN ABDULAZEEM AND COMMUNIST ACTION PARTY LEADER FATEH JAMMOUS OPPOSED SUCH AN EXPANSION FOR FEAR IT WOULD DILUTE THEIR INFLUENCE IN THE GROUP, THE MAJORITY OF MEMBERS BELIEVE THEY SHOULD BROADEN THE COALITION AND BRING IN YOUNGER ASSOCIATES, AS WELL AS TOLERANT MUSLIMS AND ISLAMISTS, SEIF SAID. DD MEMBERS WILL APPROACH INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE BEEN NOMINATED AND VETTED BY THE FULL GROUP AND PROPOSE EITHER DD MEMBERSHIP OR ASSOCIATION. ADDITIONALLY, THE DD EVENTUALLY HOPES TO PROMOTE ACTIVITIES FOR YOUTH, SUCH AS FILM NIGHTS AND VOLUNTEER PROJECTS, "TO BRING BACK THE CULTURE OF WORKING TOGETHER AS A SOCIETY," SEIF SAID.

¶3. (C) DD MEMBERS, INCLUDING THOSE FROM ALL SEVEN OF THE KURDISH PARTIES IN THE COALITION, HAVE FORMALLY DECIDED TO BOYCOTT SYRIA'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, SEIF SAID. OVER THE MARCH 23-24 SYRIAN WEEKEND, THE DD RELEASED A STATEMENT ANNOUNCING ITS BOYCOTT, "BASED ON A PREJUDICED, BIASED LAW," (A REFERENCE TO THE SARG'S FAILURE TO PASS LONG-PROMISED NEW LAWS FOR POLITICAL PARTIES AND ELECTIONS) AND BECAUSE "THE

ELECTIONS PROCESS IS BASED ON FALSIFYING AND FORGERY." (POST WILL EXPAND ON THESE POINTS IN AN ELECTIONS UPDATE SEPTTEL.)

¶4. (C) STATE OF THE REGIME: ASKED FOR HIS ASSESSMENT, SEIF ASSERTED THAT THE ASAD REGIME HAS CONVINCED THE MAJORITY OF THE SYRIAN PUBLIC THAT SYRIA HAS WON ITS BATTLE WITH THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, SHATTERING ITS INTERNATIONAL ISOLATION. SEIF POINTED TO THE MARCH 14 VISIT OF EU FOREIGN POLICY CHIEF JAVIER SOLANA, THE MARCH 12 VISIT OF A/S ELLEN SAUERBREY, AND THE MARCH 10 BAGHDAD CONFERENCE ATTENDED BY SYRIAN AND U.S. OFFICIALS, AS EXAMPLES THE SARG COULD USE TO BUTTRESS ITS CASE.

¶5. (C) IN REALITY, HOWEVER, THE SARG CONTINUES TO WORRY ABOUT ITS FATE, PARTICULARLY GIVEN THE LOOMING PROSPECT OF AN INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL BEING FORMED TO TRY SUSPECTS IN THE ASSASSINATION OF FORMER LEBANESE PM RAFIK HARIRI, SEIF ASSERTED. SIGNS OF GENERAL SARG UNEASE INCLUDE A RECENT DECREE REQUIRING ALL ELECTION CANDIDATES TO GET APPROVAL 48 HOURS IN ADVANCE FOR ELECTION-RELATED MEETINGS, IN ADDITION TO HEIGHTENED SARG SURVEILLANCE ON MEMBERS OF THE OPPOSITION, HE SAID. "THIS IS A CRITICAL TIME, AND THEY WANT TO CONTROL EVERYTHING," SEIF STATED.

¶6. (C) FOR EXAMPLE, SARG SECURITY AGENTS ASKED SEIF TO LEAVE THE SITE OF A MARCH 21 KURDISH NEW YEAR FESTIVAL OUTSIDE OF DAMASCUS ON THE TRUMPED UP PRETEXT THAT MEMBERS OF UNNAMED KURDISH GROUPS WANTED TO HARM HIM. (SEIF HAD GONE TO THE FESTIVAL TO WISH KURDISH LEADERS A HAPPY NEW YEAR AND THOUGHT PERHAPS THAT HE WOULD BE ASKED TO SPEAK. IT WAS THE SECURITY SERVICES' FEARS THAT HE MIGHT BE ALLOWED A PLATFORM IN FRONT OF SUCH A LARGE CROWD THAT MAY HAVE LED THEM TO ORDER HIM TO LEAVE, SEIF SURMISED.) FOR AN HOUR OR SO, SEIF STOOD HIS GROUND ARGUING THAT IT WAS HIS RIGHT AS A FREE SYRIAN CITIZEN TO BE THERE, GIVING IN WHEN HE SENSED THAT FORCE WOULD BE USED IF HE DID NOT RELENT.

¶7. (C) SECURITY AGENTS THEN ESCORTED HIM THE OFFICE OF STATE SECURITY HEAD GENERAL FUAD NASSIF KHEIRBEK WHERE ANOTHER OFFICER SPENT ABOUT TWO HOURS TRYING TO CONVINCE SEIF THAT THE "KURDS WERE A RED-LINE ISSUE" AND--USING WHAT SEIF DEEMED BOGUS HISTORY--THAT MANY KURDS HERE DID NOT HAVE A LEGITIMATE CLAIM TO CITIZENSHIP AS THEY HAD MIGRATED HERE FROM OTHER COUNTRIES. SEIF SAID HE RESPONDED THAT ANY PERSON WHO RESIDES FIVE YEARS IN SYRIA HAS THE LEGAL RIGHT TO APPLY FOR CITIZENSHIP AND THAT HE WAS TRYING TO BUILD BRIDGES BETWEEN COMMUNITIES. AT THE END OF THE ENCOUNTER, SECURITY AGENTS DROVE SEIF TOWARD ADRA'A PRISON IN DAMASCUS, DROPPING HIM ON THE WAY IN FRONT OF AN INSTITUTION FOR MENTAL-DISABLED PERSONS AND PROMISING THAT "NEXT TIME THEY WOULD LEAVE HIM INSIDE," HE SAID.

¶8. (C) SEIF SAID THE SARG WAS WATCHING CLOSELY THE UPCOMING ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT IN RIYADH AND THAT IF THERE WAS NO SOLUTION FOR THE LEBANON CRISIS, "SYRIA WOULD BE BLAMED." HE ALSO CALLED THE FORMATION OF A PALESTINIAN NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT (NUG) AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE U.S. TO REGAIN ITS CREDIBILITY IN THE REGION BY TAKING A POSITION OF INDEPENDENT OF ISRAEL "BECAUSE EVERYONE IN THE ARAB REGION SYMPATHIZES WITH THE MILLIONS OF PALESTINIANS WHO ARE REALLY SUFFERING." CORBIN